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SUBJECT: SHOURA COUNCIL MEMBER ON SOUTHERN UNREST: SALEH'S
CONCESSIONS MAY NOT SUFFICE LONG-TERM

REF: SANAA 942

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. According to a well-connected Shoura Council member, President Saleh made some mistakes which helped escalate southern unrest. His current efforts to stop the situation from deteriorating will probably prevent a crisis during this weekend's Unity Day celebrations/demonstrations, but in the long term the President, who is under an increasing amount of stress, may be unwilling to take the necessary difficult steps to address southern grievances.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Over a private lunch on May 18, Shoura Council member and former cabinet member Mohamed al-Tayeb painted a bleak picture of developments in Yemen's southern governorates and of the pressures building on President Saleh. (Note: Al-Tayeb, who chews qat with President Saleh, enjoys greater access to the President's inner circle than his title suggests. End Note.)

¶3. (C) Things in the south got out of hand, said al-Tayeb, because the President "made some mistakes." Paramount among these mistakes was the President's behavior during an April 1 telephone call with Sheikh Tariq al-Fadhli, a former ally of President Saleh with close extremist ties, during which the President became so enraged with al-Fadhli's attitude that he let loose a series of insults "like you've never heard before," said al-Tayeb. The next morning, al-Fadhli stunned the President (and pretty much everyone else) by announcing his support for the Southern Movement. Had the President better controlled his temper during the telephone call, said al-Tayeb, al-Fadhli would likely have handled things differently.

¶4. (C) Al-Tayeb also criticized the Information Minister's "crazy, stupid" decision to shut down several independent newspapers which had been reporting on developments in the south. Noting that the Information Minister could not have done so without the support and approval of the President, al-Tayeb pointed to the move as another error in judgment by the President, one likely to have international repercussions if the decision is not reversed soon.

¶5. (C) Once the President realized the amount of support al-Fadhli's announcement was generating, he realized that he had to act quickly to prevent the situation in the south from spiraling out of control, said al-Tayeb. He sent Northwest Regional Military Commander Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (who is married to al-Fadhli's sister) to talk to al-Fadhli; al-Fadhli's brothers are also reportedly engaging in behind-the-scenes dialogue with the ROYG. (Note: According to al-Tayeb, the President has not spoken directly to al-Fadhli since their telephone argument the night before al-Fadhli's announcement. End Note.) The President also sent the Prime Minister to the southern governorate of

Hadramout and the Vice President to Aden; both officials used their visits to inaugurate development projects in an attempt to satisfy complaints that the south does not receive its fair share of such projects. (Note: Post is sending via septel an overview of recent ROYG actions to address southern grievances. End Note.)

¶16. (C) Unfortunately, said al-Tayeb, although the President is (only just recently) saying all the right things about how he wants to make amends and address southern grievances, in reality he is not prepared to make the serious concessions that are needed. These concessions fall into three main categories: replacement of corrupt military commanders, return of seized lands, and decentralization measures. The most important of these three steps, said al-Tayeb, is the first one, particularly with regard to Eastern Regional Military Commander Mohamed Ali Mohsen (no relation to Northwest Regional Military Commander/al-Fadhli's brother-in-law) and Southern Regional Military Commander Mahdi Maqwalla, both of whom are among the most corrupt officials in the country. (Note: Maqwalla, for example, has secured so much land for himself that he is now known as "Aden's landlord." End Note.) The problem, said al-Tayeb, is that the President trusts very few people, and he would rather keep a corrupt commander whom he trusts than replace him with an honest person whom he does not necessarily trust. (Note: According to an as-yet unconfirmed press report, the President has replaced the Southern Regional Military Commander with a nephew, Tariq Saleh, head of the Presidential Guard. Tariq Saleh has a reputation as an honest and competent individual. End Note.)

¶17. (C) Given the above steps, said al-Tayeb, combined with the fact that the southerners remain largely disorganized and have not yet coalesced into a unified movement speaking with one voice, he is not particularly worried about events this coming weekend, when Yemen will celebrate the 19th anniversary of Yemen's unification. He does not expect protests and demonstrations (even those calling for secession) to spin out of control; if they do, he does not expect the ROYG to respond with disproportionate force. The President has things under control, said al-Tayeb, "for the time being." Al-Tayeb is far more concerned about the long-term prospects for the south, especially if the President does not take some of the hard steps outlined above. The President is worried, too, said al-Tayeb, who described the current set of challenges (the south, the al-Houthi rebellion in the north, al-Qaeda, the economy, etc.) facing Yemen as the worst the President has ever faced and stated that the President has been drinking more each evening and has begun taking a sleeping pill at night.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) Al-Tayeb's observations track with reftel assessment of the short- and long-term implications of southern developments. He knows the President well, and has a good understanding both of the President's temperament and of how far the President is willing to go. In the case of the south, the latter may be "not far enough." END COMMENT.
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